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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether a morally developed person is one who feels strongly about moral issues, or understands moral issues, or acts ethically when dealing with other people. It argues that the meaning of the term "moral" is concerned with how people ought to treat each other and that studies in morality should deal with the actions of people as they function within groups. The trend in gifted education to focus on the individual's affective state when discussing moral development, such as a passion for justice, or to measure cognitive development, such as the recognition of universal moral principles, is deemed as overly individualistic and conceptually inadequate. The paper outlines Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral judgment: punishment and obedience, individual instrumental purpose and exchange, mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and conformity, social system and conscience maintenance, prior rights and social contract or utility, and universal ethical principles. It points out that Kohlberg's research examines what people think, not how people actually behave. Developing and applying a methodology to make observations of moral actions is discussed, along with contrasting paradigms of moral development. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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Measuring Moral Development:

Feeling, Thinking, and Doing

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Abstract

Is a morally developed person one who

feels strongly about moral issues,
or
understands moral issues,
or
acts ethically when dealing with other people?

In this paper, I answer that the third alternative is important. The meaning of the term Moral is concerned with how people ought to treat each other. Studies in morality should deal with the *actions* of people as they function within groups.

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In contrast, discussions of moral development typically focus on the internal state of the individual. Within Gifted Education, evidence of extraordinary qualities is sought. Some theorists discuss the affective state, such as a passion for justice. Others set out to measure cognitive development, such as the recognition of universal moral principles.

This paper argues that each of these approaches is overly individualistic and conceptually inadequate. Both conceptual and empirical approaches to moral development require a focus on the effective actions of people in group situations.

Exciting recent work in the development of a cross-cultural research model of moral development will be described.

Introduction

By definition, gifted persons are advanced or superior cognitively and creatively. The belief that they may be more morally developed is a popular one, and an ancient idea. In the West, Plato recommended seeking out the most able of citizens to be virtuous and wise rulers (Ebenstein 1991). In the East, Confucius speaks of the exemplary person who is "clear in discernment, of far-reaching intelligence, and all-embracing knowledge, possessing all Heavenly virtue..." (Confucius, 500B.C.E.)

An alternative view is that gifted persons have a moral duty to be morally developed, to refine their leadership skills and to make an especial contribution to society and the solution of social problems (Jewell 1999).

Both of these claims, that gifted persons are morally highly developed, or alternatively, that gifted persons *ought* to be morally highly developed, are contentious claims. They lead to a further interesting question – how could we measure moral development? How could we tell if someone was morally developed to a higher degree? What sort of observations could we make that would allow us to agree that any particular person was well developed morally?

The first step towards answering this question would be to agree on a definition of morality. I contend that morality is about how people treat each other. A moral person is someone who acts in a way that is calculated to further the interests of the other people involved, and/or to choose to take on such guiding principles to action as being honest with people, respecting them and so on. Morality is choosing to behave in appropriate ways towards others.

This definition of morality as comprising the actions of an individual who is dealing with others is uncontroversial. Telling the truth to people, or helping them in need, is recognised by all of us as moral, and in contrast to telling lies or hurting people. Yet when we look at scholars' discussions of measuring moral development we find that it is cognitive or affective development which is remarked upon, rather than actual behaviour of the individual. Observations and reports in the literature are likely to be about what people think, or what they feel, rather than what they do. The focus is on the internal state of the individual, rather than the person's actions in the community.

Cognitive theory

The most influential researcher of cognitive moral development is Lawrence Kohlberg (1981). He developed a hierarchy laying out stages of moral development.

Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Judgement

Level A. Preconventional level.

Stage1. The Stage of Punishment and Obedience
Right is literal obedience to rules and authority, avoiding punishment, and not doing physical harm.

Stage 2. The Stage of Individual Instrumental Purpose and Exchange
Right is serving one's own or other's needs and making fair deals in terms of concrete exchange.

Level B. Conventional Level

Stage 3. The Stage of Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Conformity
The right is playing a good (nice) role, being concerned about the other people and their feelings, keeping loyalty and trust with partners, and being motivated to follow rules and expectations.

Stage 4. The Stage of Social System and Conscience Maintenance.
The right is doing one's duty in society, upholding the social order, and maintaining the welfare of society or the group.

Level B/C. Transitional Level

Stage 4 1/2
Choice is personal and subjective. It is based on emotions, conscience is seen as arbitrary and relative, as are ideas such as "duty" and "morally right".

Level C. Postconventional and Principled Level

Stage 5 The Stage of Prior Rights and Social Contract or Utility
The right is upholding the basic rights, values, and legal contracts of a society, even when they conflict with the concrete rules and laws of the group.

Stage 6. The Stage of Universal Ethical Principles
This stage assumes guidance by universal ethical principles that all humanity should follow.

To ascertain what level of development might have been attained, a subject is required to answer a hypothetical question. A man's wife is ill. A pharmacist has medicine that

will cure the wife, but the man has insufficient money to afford the medicine. Should he steal the medicine?

A considerable debate has arisen about the psychological and philosophical merits of Kohlberg's scheme, but I need not summarise that debate here (Porter, 1991). Rather, I wish to draw attention to the essentially cognitive and hypothetical focus of his research. Kohlberg asks what people *think* should be the correct answer to a hypothetical question. How these same people actually behave is a different question. Nonetheless, one might consider whether, if a person is highly cognitively developed and does well at Kohlberg's hypothetical test, is it reasonable to suppose that same person will act morally?

Sadly, no. "One cannot follow moral principles if one does not understand … them. One can, however, reason in terms of such principles and not live up to them" (Miocinovic 1999). There is only a modest correlation between moral judgment and moral behaviour. Upon reflection, this makes sense. Cognitively advanced people are at least as capable of making choices as any of us and are therefore similarly capable of choosing immoral behaviour over moral behaviour.

In Contrast to Kohlberg's dry cognitive approach is the view that morality has to do with caring about people. Indeed an argument can be mounted that Kohlberg's third stage has more moral worth than the final one (Gilligan, 1982). There is an ongoing debate about the proper importance of ethical principles (Kant 1987) versus caring about real consequences for real people (Bentham and Mill 1987).

Affective theory

Other theories in moral development take an affective approach. A morally developed person in this view, feels strongly about injustice, say, or empathises with people who are suffering (Hoffman 1984). Piechowski (1997) writes of "Individuals who are guided by compassion, emotional sensitivity and moral certainty are given the appellation of moral exemplars" (p.370). Both Piechowski and Silverman (1993) cite the case of Peace Pilgrim who "gave up all her possessions except those she could carry in her pockets and walked penniless throughout the United States .. helping individuals to find inner peace." Peace Pilgim represents to these thinkers the "attainment of the personality ideal; it is marked by universal values, resolution of inner conflict, authenticity, harmony, altruism and empathy for all living creatures" (p. 20). Silverman makes links between giftedness and emotional/moral development, citing cases from the Gifted Child Development Centre such as "K… doesn't forgive herself easily if she has hurt someone's feelings…" (p.17).

How feelings and reasoning relate to each other in the moral process is an interesting question. It is plausible to suppose that a higher cognitive ability would facilitate understanding another's point of view, thus promoting empathy (Brunt1998). The reverse need not apply however. Feelings may interfere with the ability to carry out abstract moral reasoning (Delfaon et al 1997).

Moral action

I maintain that that morality has to do with how people ought to treat each other, how individuals act towards other members of their community. If this is so then measuring someone's cognitive ability or emotional intensity is not measuring moral development. Such methodology looks in the wrong place. The paradigms are individualistic and internal instead of active and relational. Emotion may be the spur to action, and cognition used to decide upon action, but one can feel without acting, and one can think without acting, and action is the essence of morality. Further, one can know (or feel) what is the right thing to do, yet act wrongly and immorally. If we wish to make observations about moral development we must make observations of moral actions.

Developing and applying a methodology to do so is not easy. It may well be the case that cognitive and affective factors in individuals are much easier to observe in a methodical way, and that is why these methods are used. It is not unknown for the tools of inquiry to determine the content of inquiry (Ellul 1980).

In Greener's (2000) study children were asked to report on their observations of other children's behaviour. More precisely they were asked to nominate which children in their community exhibited pro-social behaviour (and also which exhibited aggressive behaviour). The pro-social behaviour they were asked to match with particular children were
1. shares with others; 2. friendly to others; 3. asks others to play; 4. says nice things to others, 5. cares about how others are doing; 6. is polite to other kids; 7. cheers up others when they are sad or upset about something; 8. asks other kids to join the group at play and activity time; 9. includes other kids in their conversations; 10. helps out others when they need it.

The aggressive behaviors that the children matched to individuals in their community ranged from 'telling mean lies about people they did not like', to hitting, kicking and punching (p. 54).

Greener's study is instructive in two ways. Firstly it provides a methodology for observation of behaviors that can be categorised as morally developed. Greener did not correlate her results with other measures of development or giftedness, but a study could be devised that would do that. Secondly, there arises the interesting question of what counts as moral development. (Greener's study used items that had been generated by children in another earlier study.) There is considerable contrast amongst various views.

Contrasting paradigms of moral development

If the work of researchers such as Kohlberg, Silverman and Greener are compared, it becomes apparent that they have differing underlying assumptions about what constitutes morality. When we set out to measure moral development, which continuum should we be using? The following contrasting four paradigms can be deduced from the theorists quoted, though they are not made explicit, nor justified by them.

• The ability to resolve moral dilemmas with thoughtful reflection, rather than instinctive reaction.

• The willingness to engage in moral behaviour and eschew immoral behaviour.

• The willingness to engage in social behaviour rather than be isolated and self absorbed.

• The willingness to practise self denial rather than self-indulgence.

Until a consensus is reached amongst scholars as to which of these four continua should be used, researchers should at least be plain about which one underlies any particular study.

Recent development of research methodology

In the meantime recent research in a related field uses a methodology which could be adapted for studying moral development. MacMullin and Loughry (2000) are currently engaged in measuring the adjustment of child soldiers to community re-integration after war in Sierra Leone. From the psychosocial literature they derived eighty five markers of adjustment or maladjustment. For example, how easily does the child get angry? Does the child enjoy doing things and talking with peers?

The 85 markers were presented to representative members of the community who rated each item as a good measure of adjustment or a poor one. This process reduced the list to 45 items. Whether a particular child soldier exhibited the characteristics of good adjustment or poor adjustment could then be ascertained.

A similar methodology could prove useful in moral development research. Characteristics of moral behaviour could be derived from the research of philosophical ethicists. These characteristics could then be ratified by the community within which the subjects live. The subjects' actions within the community could be compared with the behaviour that has been deemed by this process to count as morally developed.

Conclusion

Whether advanced moral development in people correlates with other areas of advancement is an interesting question. Many thinkers conceptually link giftedness with moral endeavour, but does this link really exist?

I maintain that measures of moral development should be observations of how people act towards each other not merely what they think or how they feel.

I recommend that researchers in moral development consider which of the various paradigms underpin their observations. Are they observing dilemma resolution, or the practice of moral behaviour, or the engagement in the community, or self denial? The choice of paradigm should be made plain and justified.

Moral actions, by their very nature, take place in a community and judgment of them should take into account community expectations. In order to guard against relativism or mere popularity seeking, exemplars of moral behaviour should reflect theories and paradigms found in philosophical ethics. Judgements of moral development should rest upon real actions, rather than expressed feelings or cognitive responses to hypothetical scenarios.

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